

Creative Ways to use Dictionaries in the Classroom

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Abstract

Many teachers seem to feel that their students can be too dependent on their bilingual dictionaries and use them too much to translate word for word. However, there are ways to use these dictionaries in the EFL/ESL classroom as a means to foster collaborative learning and help students to take responsibility for their own learning. This workshop introduced some techniques I have used to help my students use their dictionaries to make their vocabulary learning more meaningful, memorable and communicative. During the workshop, participants were asked to take part in activities using these techniques, which can be adapted to suit any level of learner and are most suited to junior high school age learners to adults.

Introduction

Native speaking teachers seem to be divided on the issue of students using bilingual dictionaries in the classroom. There are many factors involved in this debate, which include students being too dependent on dictionaries for direct translation and the limited amount of information most dictionaries display about how native speakers use language items. However, some of the assets of bilingual dictionaries are also explored. These include the difficulties students experience using monolingual dictionaries and how, when used creatively, bilingual dictionaries can be effective learning tools. This workshop examined some of these issues in detail and then introduced some techniques I have used to promote learner autonomy in my classes, to enhance the acquisition of new vocabulary and promote the responsible usage of bilingual dictionaries

The Detriments and Assets of Bilingual Dictionaries.

Some of the main arguments against the use of these dictionaries are they encourage students to translate from the L1 to the L2 and vice versa instead of encouraging students to try and think in the L2 (Thompson, 1987). Thompson (1987) also maintains they support the idea that there exists a one-to-one correlation between the two languages. Furthermore bilingual dictionaries often do not provide a very accurate description of how the L2 word is used in real life language or how frequently it is used by native English speakers. An example of this is the word “and”. This word is the second most frequently used word in spoken North American English (McCarthy, McCarten and Sandiford, 2005). However this type of information is rarely given in many dictionaries. These are just some of the complaints many

native English speaking teachers make about bilingual dictionaries. However there are always two sides to every debate. Now I will examine some of the assets of using bilingual dictionaries in the classroom.

Many teachers seem to favour the use of monolingual dictionaries in their classes rather than allow students to use bilingual dictionaries. However, research done by Nation (2003) on learning vocabulary has shown that for students to use a monolingual dictionary easily they need to know at least 2000 words in English. Furthermore, Nation (2003) concludes students do not achieve this until after 5-6 years of language study. Therefore it is no surprise that surveys done on how students use dictionaries; show that they prefer bilingual dictionaries (Laufer & Kimmel, 1997; Atkins & Vanantola, 1997; Baxter, 1980). Considering the fairly recent movement in language teaching to promote the concept of learner autonomy, it seems important to me to pay attention to what the students want regarding the way they learn English.

In addition, Wen and Johnson (1997) did research on what good language learners do to learn effectively. They found that these students frequently used bilingual dictionaries but they used them constructively. As Brumfit (1985) strongly states about dictionary usage; "...they are the most widespread single language improvement device ever invented. We can not prevent our students using them, but we can ensure that they are used wisely." (Preface, p.v)

Dictionary Components and Activities

Atkins (1985) explored thirteen components, most or all of which are often a part of dictionary entries. For the purposes of this workshop, I isolated 3 of these components and devised activities for my students to do that would encourage them to actively notice these worthwhile components in their bilingual dictionaries. These components are:

- a. Details of the parts of speech to which the head word is connected,
- b. Indications of style and register, and
- c. Exemplification of usage, including collocations.

Details of the parts of speech to which the head word is connected

I feel that this is a useful component to draw to my beginner level students' attention. Words in English frequently have two grammatical functions; a word can be used as a noun in some sentences and a verb in others. For example; the word fudge can be used as an uncountable noun for the food, and a transitive verb "to avoid giving details or a clear answer about something"(Collins English Paperback Dictionary, 1983, p.323). I've found that my lower

level students frequently knew one function of the word but often not both. To raise their awareness of this concept I often use an activity I call word lists.

To introduce the activity I put example sentences on the board to illustrate how a word can act as both a noun and verb. Then the students are put into groups, making sure that at least one student in each group has a dictionary. One person in the group is designated as the official group writer and the students, using their dictionaries, make a list of English words that can be used as both a noun and a verb. In order to stimulate students and inject an element of fun into the activity, students are given a time limit of 3-5 minutes to make the list. The group with the longest list at the end of the time limit is the winner.

Indications of Style and Register

One thing that most students desire in their language acquisition is to sound like native English speakers. One error that even the best language learners frequently make is to use the wrong register, often utilizing formal language when, at least in speaking, the informal forms are usually used. So to help my intermediate level students become aware of register I use an activity I call categories.

Simple examples of formal and informal language usage are put on the board and students are asked to identify which is which (see Appendix 1). They are then asked why the different registers are used in each of these conversations. In dialogue 1 the conversation is between two friends so informal language is used. In dialogue 2 the conversation is between senior and junior employees therefore more formal language is used. The students are put in groups, ensuring that at least one student has a dictionary, and are given a hand out (see Appendix 2) asking them to put the various words and phrases into the correct category of formal or informal language. One thing to note here is that the hand out prepared for this workshop (Appendix 2) was deliberately made quite difficult because the participants were themselves experienced language teachers and/or very high level language learners. Hand outs used with my students were graded to match their language level so that the activity proved challenging but not too difficult.

Exemplification of Usage, including Collocations

The concept of collocations or word friends is important for students to be aware of, therefore one activity I often use with my higher level students to review vocabulary and reinforce the idea of word collocations is based on quiz game shows.

An appropriate number of previously studied vocabulary words are prepared before the class,

one word per student. The students are put into small groups and given their list of words. For example a group of five students will be given a list of 5 words. They are informed that they are going to make a quiz for their classmates and later they will conduct the quiz in class. The students must be told not to show their word lists to anyone outside their group. Next I model how to organize their quiz on the board with a simple example. The students then make collocations for each of their words on their lists, one true and 2 false. It is important, at this stage, to encourage them to be creative and not to make it too easy. When all the groups have finished making their quiz questions and answers, have them quiz each other. Each correct answer earns their team a point. The group with the highest points is the quiz champion.

Conclusion

These are just a few activities to illustrate how I have had my students put their dictionaries to creative use in the classroom, while at the same time making the vocabulary they have learned more memorable and vocabulary learning more fun. I believe that bilingual dictionaries when used appropriately are a good language learning tool. The dictionary has been much maligned by many language teachers. However, as Brumfit (1985, Preface, p.v) so eloquently says; “All members of the language professions will benefit from greater understanding of our key institutions, and the dictionary is probably the most taken for granted of all these.”

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Appendix 1: Dialogue Examples

Dialogue 1

Jack
Q: Are you going to the party on Saturday?

Susan
A: Yeah, of course I am!!

Dialogue 2

Mr. Tanaka
Q: Are you going to the meeting at head office tomorrow?

Mr. Kwan
A: Yes, sir, of course I am.

Appendix 2: Creative Ways to Use Dictionaries: “Categories”

Put the following words or phrases into the appropriate category of informal or formal:

yucky, coward, have/take a crack at something, sassy, stop being enjoyable, yeah, unpleasant, begin to sleep, chicken, try to do something, disrespectful, go/turn sour, measly, freak, old fashioned and funny, someone who is very interested in something , yes, nod off, corny, small and disappointing amount

INFORMAL

- yeah

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FORMAL

- yes

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